In *After New Criticism*, Frank Lentricchia gives a magisterial survey of the concept of the self-consciousness. Referring to the self-conscious tradition in fiction writing as "conservative fictionalism," Lentricchia traces its origin to Kant and points out that one of the difficulties with the opposition of fiction and reality is that it severely and unnecessarily narrows artistic options by enforcing an all too predictable dialectic. Also, in his self-conscious recognition of gulf between fictive discourse and being, the poet forges another link to not so distant aestheticist kin.

For Lentricchia, the counsel of aestheticised self-consciousness is intellectual paralysis and despair. From a valid perception of the difficulty of humane vision and humane action, it leaps to the metaphysical conclusion that all perspectives, no matter how subtly, how flexibly managed, are inherently vicious, and that moral security lies only in withdrawal from action and refusal of all points of view except the view that no point of view is any good. "Self-consciousness of this sort", says Lentricchia, "is the modernist intellectual's rationalization of his alienation and impotence for this specially endowed fictive literary language permits the poet to say anything he pleases. No matter how repugnant. Self
consciousness then by producing an awareness of the fictiveness of fictions, produces the knowledge which saves us from being caught up in the net of moral relations.¹

Hawthornian self-consciousness is quite the reverse of the kind of self-consciousness described by Lentricchia. It is not a single-minded focus upon art for art's sake, and hardly a betrayal of the larger issues challenging the narrative artist, rather it is the most comprehensive fulfilment of those challenges that considers not only what it will say but the philosophical and aesthetic grounds for saying it.

Undoubtedly, Hawthornian self-consciousness has wide ranging implications. In terms of literary theory, it leads us to what we have termed Hawthorne's "transformative" poetics. Hawthorne, also sets up the familiar dialectic between fiction and reality, making the distinction between the two, the very basis of his definition of romance. But as our readings of the four romances have demonstrated, by making the narrative turn upon itself, by emphasizing the fictiveness of fiction, by deliberately incorporating within the text all the external grounds from which the text could be possibly interpreted, Hawthorne is seeking neither to represent nor to bring into doubt the reality of the fallen world. Instead, his famous neutral territory is designed to serve as a meeting ground where the author
and the reader, can help each other discover a mode of perception that can enable each one of them to deal with the unavoidable negative realities of the fallen world in the subjective world of their respective consciousness. Far from being an escape from moral relations, Hawthorne's self-consciousness is deeply engaged with moral issues at all times.

In cultural terms, Hawthorne's authorial self-consciousness can be seen as part of the larger nationalistic self-consciousness of a growing nation in search of its identity and it leads us to the myth of American settlement. By repeatedly emphasizing the parallel between the Eden myth and the myth of American settlement, Hawthorne establishes his understanding of human history as a repetitive pattern that needs to be transcended if the present is to escape from the dead past. He reinforces this pattern by emphasizing recurrences and reflexivity in the plots of his narratives, by setting up two levels which reflect each other. The fact that things always happen twice in his fiction becomes both the chief worry and the chief hope in his narrative. For given the reality of the fallen world, complete escape from the vicious pattern of repetition is often not possible. But revision is, through a return with a difference, like Hester putting on the letter "A" herself, or Holgrave successfully rejecting the temptation of doing to Phoebe, what Maule did to Alice. The difference that enables this form of renewal is, in the final analysis, rooted in the self-conscious
understanding of the web of connectivity that links each human being to the other.

Repetition and reflections enable Hawthorne to circle back to the starting point, to go back and re-examine root concepts, which shape his narrative and serve as a foundation to his house of fiction. In literary terms, it enables him to re-examine the empirical and the imaginative modes of perception and problematize the question of narrative authority; to re-work romantic aesthetics and re-evaluate the romantic idealization of the artist-figure even as he depicts the indignities and rewards of being an artist in the nineteenth century America. On the cultural front, the circling back enables him to re-evaluate the Puritan heritage; to engage with contemporary ideological issues of race, class and gender as he examines the compulsions of living in a community. (It must be admitted, that on these issues Hawthorne often takes positions which modern readers have difficulty in accepting). In the context of America, it enables him, on the one hand to celebrate aspects of democratic functioning, on the other, to critique the comfortable utopianism, and the complacent middle class dreams of renewal and freedom.

In philosophical terms, Hawthornian self-consciousness leads us to the eternal verities, what Hawthorne called the truths of the human heart.

244
Hawthorne engagement with timeless questions of sin and guilt make his romances rich meditations on atemporal and universal questions. In this context he can be seen thinking of his native land and culture as a setting for stories that have played themselves out since time immemorial, leading to a remarkable appropriation of the Biblical myth for secular and literary ends. The romances not just point to the fall but also to the entire cycle of redemption. They lead to the great paradox buried at the heart of Christianity - that of the fortunate fall. In the Biblical tradition man fell into self-consciousness. Self-conscious knowledge insists on separation of the knowing mind and the external world - and also to the fall of man from his primal innocence into a knowledge of evil. The innocent state is, of course, equated with self-unity while the self-conscious state is equated with self-divisions, doubts, and conflict. But if knowledge is to begin with divisive, it is also the only means available to mankind for achieving a higher unity or integration. In the Hawthornian romance, given the demands of his vocation, it is the artist who is left to confront the enormity of this particular paradox.

For the modern reader, Hawthorne's lifelong pre-occupation with the concept of original sin is a reminder of what western religious traditions, despite their many limitations can still deliver. In recent times we have stumbled from concentration camps, gulags, killing fields, genocide,
biocide, torture chambers, ghettos. All sorrows can be borne if you put them into stories." writes Wendy Farley, quoting Hannah Arendt. But the stories we tell in our T.V. productions, in press and films are often trivial and insensitive. Hawthorne's brooding romances, in reclaiming the power of an enduring traditional concept allow us to think more profoundly of both the origins, continuing reality and our shared responsibility for the evil around us. Of course Hawthorne's writings are unable to do, what no one has ever been able to do - provide an answer to the question of sin and suffering which can remove them altogether. But they do enable us to reflect on sin and suffering with greater insight.

In short, the aesthetic, the cultural and the universal exists simultaneously in Hawthorne's romances, and to engage with the fullness of his achievement, we, as scholars and critics, should be able to function at all three levels simultaneously. We too need to be able to keep alive in our consciousness both temporal historicism and atemporal universalism, as well as the awareness of the rich embroidery of the self-conscious artist. To do less is to diminish, as always with Hawthorne, not only the achievement of the artist but also our own human freedom as readers.
NOTES
